STARTING WITH WOMEN

Protecting land and resource rights for all
Women's rights to land are not secure.

Across the world, women's rights to land and resources are key to increasing food security, reducing poverty, and mitigating conflict. Yet, in most developing countries, existing laws do little to protect those rights. Even where legal rights to land for women exist, persistent challenges—from cultural barriers to a lack of understanding among government agencies and individuals—prevent women from realizing the promise of those rights.

Women often lose the land they rely on for income, food, and shelter when their relationships to men change, for example in the event of marriage, separation, death, because the husband marries a new wife, or because they do not have a son. Men, by contrast, tend to have rights to land by birthright.

In Uganda, for example, while many women may successfully access land through their husbands, local customs dictate that a widow can only claim land that belonged to her husband if she has a son.
But women can realize their rights to land.

The Starting with Women Approach begins by asking what rights women have to land and what challenges they face in realizing those rights, and moves on to strengthen and secure those rights, both within families and in the community. The approach starts from the view that women in all communities know what they want and need in terms of their land rights, and that with information, guidance, and support from one another, they can develop a plan to get what they want and need. And over the years, we’ve seen evidence that this is true.

There is a great change in the way women’s land conflict cases are handled by the families and elders because of the influence of the project; the participating women have in turn spoken to their families and communities on land rights and they are more recognized now.

FEMALE PARTICIPANT, FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION, APWOR PARISH, PURANGA SUB COUNTY, UGANDA, JULY 2013
How are we Starting with Women?

The disadvantages faced by women can seem insurmountable, but there are concrete ways to address them. The Starting with Women approach is a set of tools first piloted in northern Uganda to help women assess the barriers to their land tenure security, identify potential solutions to these challenges, and take steps to overcome the obstacles that they face in order to secure their rights to land. The model works on three levels, engaging with groups of women, with individual women, and with communities.

Starting with Women means working with communities – including local leaders and local authorities – so they become aware and supportive of women’s land rights. A woman’s land rights are more secure if they are legitimate, and this legitimacy improves when families, clans, and communities recognize and respect these rights.
**Starting with Women means engaging with groups of women** to build their understanding of their rights and encourage them to voice their experiences and aspirations, allowing them to support each other and build their confidence and capacity to exercise their rights. In northern Uganda, women’s group meetings taught women about their rights to land, and increased their confidence overall. Women started to openly discuss land rights issues and initiating consultations at the family and community level.

**Starting with Women means helping individual women find ways to address the challenges to their tenure security.** This might include mediation, informal meetings with clan or family heads, or customary dispute resolution.

**Men have now started showing their wives land demarcations and giving them more access to the land because they have learned about and now recognize women land rights.**

FEMALE PARTICIPANT, TE-OKUTU PARISH, LIRA PALWO SUB COUNTY, UGANDA, JULY 2013
Why are we Starting with Women?

Securing women’s land rights benefits entire communities. Greater land tenure security for women leads to higher incomes, increased food production, and higher levels of education and child nutrition. When women have secure rights to land and resources, they gain power over household decisions and gain status within their families and communities. And women who have control over the household budget often devote more of it to their children’s education and family nutrition than men do. Research shows that if women worldwide had the same access and rights to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20–30%.*

A woman’s land rights are secure if:

- they are enshrined in law;
- they are not vulnerable to changes in her social status or in her community;
- they are granted for an extended period;
- they are enforceable; and
- they do not require an additional layer of effort for her to exercise those rights.

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The ‘Starting with Women Approach’ is an adaptation of the ‘Women First Approach’, which was developed at Landesa, in collaboration with WORUDET and Associates Research Trust Uganda.
Women and natural resource development projects

Women are usually the most negatively affected by natural resource development projects – such as mining and oil development – yet they are the least likely to benefit from such projects. When new extractive projects are proposed, women are generally left out of negotiations and agreements, leaving their rights and needs unaddressed.

Social norms and customs often exclude women from accessing future economic benefits. For example, women’s inputs are generally not included in benefit-sharing agreements, and women-headed households may not receive payments made to community members if they do not have a male representative.

Women need to be involved early in the design of these projects to ensure that their interests and concerns are heard, and that their needs are accounted for equally with those of men. Research suggests that by involving women early on, the whole family and whole community will be better off for it.
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StartingWithWomen.ResourceEquity.org